

SOLITAIRE¹

By FLETA CAMPBELL SPRINGER

From Harper's Magazine

WE were sitting — three Frenchmen, a young American named Homan, and I — in the café of one of those small Paris hotels much frequented, even then, by officers on leave. It was the winter of 1912, when the Balkans were playing out their colorful little curtain-raiser to the great drama which followed — playing it, as they say in the theater, “in one,” using only the very smallest part of the stage, and failing even in their most climactic moments to completely conceal the ominous sounds from behind the curtain where the stage was being set for the real business of the play.

At the tables a sprinkling of English and Americans of the usual transient type mingled with French from the provinces, and here and there a swarthy Balkan in uniform accented the room.

It was the presence of those other Americans — two or three, I should say, besides Homan and myself, though I had n't noticed particularly — that gave the special significance to Homan's exclamation when he discovered Corey.

I saw him pause with his glass half raised — he was gazing straight past me over my shoulder — and a smile, meant for me, came into his eyes.

“Look!” he said, “at the American!”

I turned, because his manner indicated clearly enough that I might, squarely round in my chair, and immediately it was clear to me why he had said just that. Any one would have said it — any other American, I mean —

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which makes it more striking — and said it involuntarily, too. You could n't have helped it. And yet you would encounter a dozen perfectly unmistakable Americans every day in Paris without feeling the necessity for any remark. It was simply that Corey was so typically the kind of American you *would n't* encounter in Paris, or any other place, you felt, outside his own country. The curious thing about him was that instantly on seeing him, almost before you thought of America, you thought of a particular and localized section of America. You thought of the Middle West. There was something wholesome and provincial and colloquial about him. He was like a boy you'd gone to grammar school with — the kind of fellow to succeed to his father's business and marry and settle down in his home town, with New York City his farthest dream of venture and romance.

Yet there he sat across the table from a dark-visaged Balkan officer who was carrying on the conversation in careful English — it would have been unimaginable that he should speak in anything *but* English to him — and it may have been the brilliance of this man's uniform which kept one, just at first, from seeing that he, too, our American, was wearing some sort of uniform, khaki color, very workman-like and shipshape, which might, if there had been the least chance of throwing us off, have thrown us. But his round, good-natured, uncomplicated face, his light brown hair and the way it was brushed — the very way it grew, like a school-boy's — the comfortable set of his broad shoulders, his kind of energetic inclination to stoutness, and even the way he sat at the table, were pure American Middle West and nothing else, no matter what his uniform proclaimed. He was as American as the flag, as the opening bars of "The Star-Spangled Banner," as American as Kansas, Missouri, and Iowa.

And when, at young Homan's exclamation, I had turned and found him looking straight toward me, the twinkle of his eyes had the effect of a friendly wave of his hand. He had, of course, as he said afterward, "spotted us," too. Then he had seen — and it amused him — the little play of our discovery.

I was just turning back to applaud to Homan the ob-

viousness of his designation, and to wonder, with him, what the uniform meant, when my eye was caught by a thin, brilliantly colored line drawn, it seemed, just above the left breast pocket of his coat, and about the same length.

My first impression of the man, of the familiarity of his type, had, I suppose, been so strong as to dull for a moment my reaction to this discovery. I had seen that vari-colored line often enough before, on the uniforms of British officers or French; I had perhaps seen it on an American, but certainly I had never seen it on an American like this. No wonder the connection was slow to establish itself. It was a decoration bar, and there must have been six ribbons at least, if not more.

For sheer incongruous association, I doubt if you'd find a more pat example in a lifetime than the man I had, on sight, conceived this one to be—the man I may as well say now he actually *was*—and that bar of ribbons pinned on his khaki-colored coat.

Young Homan had caught it, too, and was sending past me his deliberate stare of amazement.

It was not exactly as if we thought he had n't come by them honestly, but more as if we suggested to each other that he could n't surely have got them in the way decorations were usually got; it seemed somehow impossible that he understood their importance. And there was still something of that in our attitude when, later on, after dinner, we had drifted into the *salon* with the rest for our coffee, and by a kind of natural gravitation had found ourselves in conversation with our compatriot, whose jocular friendliness led young Homan to ask, half in fun to be sure, where he had got all the decorations. He showed certainly no very proper appreciation of their importance by his answer:

"Bought 'em, at the Galleries Lafayette. Get any kind you want there, y' know."

We laughed, all of us, for everybody had seen the cases of medals and decorations at the Galleries. I believe for an instant the youngster was half inclined to think he *had* bought them. I know *I* was. As some kind of outlandish practical joke, of course. It seemed, absurd as the

idea was, so much likelier than that he could have been through the kind of experiences which result in being decorated by foreign governments. And such an imposing array! The scarlet ribbon of the Legion of Honor, the green of the Japanese "Rising Sun," the brilliant stripes of Russian and English decorations, and strange ones I had never seen before!

You see, he had turned out much more Middle West than we had imagined. In the first ten minutes of our conversation he had spoken of "home," and mentioned the name of the town—Dubuque, Iowa! And a few minutes later he gave us, by the merest chance phrase or two, involving the fact that his married sister lived "a block and a half down the street" from his mother's house, a perfectly complete picture of that street—broad and shady and quiet, of his mother's yellow frame house, and the other, white with a green lawn round it, where his sister lived. And the point was that he was making no effort toward such an effect. He was only being himself.

His dinner companion, the Balkan officer, came in presently and addressed Corey as "Doctor" (I adjusted myself to *that*, still with the Dubuque setting, however), and it was in the conversation following upon the new introduction that the object of his being in Paris came out. He told us, quite by the way, though not in the least depreciating the importance of his mission—that he was in Paris for a few days looking up anesthetics for the Serbian army. He had been working, he said, down in the Balkans since shortly after the outbreak of the war, in charge of a sanitary section. They'd been out of anesthetics for some time now—impossible to get them in—and they'd been operating, amputating the poor devils' legs and arms, *without* anesthetics; and now at last he'd left things long enough to come up to Paris himself and see what could be done. He was starting back the next day or the day after that.

Corey, from Dubuque! In a makeshift Serbian field hospital, in that terrible cold, performing delicate and difficult operations—wholesale, as they must have been performed—on wounded Balkan soldiers; probing for

bullets in raw wounds—*that* was a picture to set up beside the one we had of him in Dubuque!

And yet—it was n't at all a question of doubt (we'd read it all in the papers day after day); it wasn't that we did n't believe Corey was telling the truth; his evidence was too obvious for that—the picture did n't somehow succeed in painting itself—I can't to this day say why. Surely the Balkans just then—operations without anes- thetics, the pageantry and blood-red color of war—surely there was pigment of more brilliant hue than any contained in the mere statement that his married sister lived a block and a half down the street from his mother's. But the picture was n't painted. Corey was n't the artist to do it. Not, mind you, that he tried; he was as far from trying to impress one, from affectation, as a boy of fourteen.

I do remember my imagination taking me far enough to think that if I were a soldier, and wounded, and had to have a leg or an arm off, I could n't think of a man I'd rather have do it than Corey. Oh yes, I believed him; I knew he'd been down there in the Balkans, as he said, and was going back again to-morrow—but I went right on seeing him in Dubuque, practising his quiet, prosperous profession in the same suite of offices his father had used before him.

He himself lent, by the things he said, force and reality to the illusion. He'd like nothing better, he declared, than settling down in Dubuque for the rest of his life, and enjoying a home of his own. He intended, in fact, to do just that when he had finished the Balkan business. "I'm that type," he said. "I never was meant to knock around the world like this."

And he *was* that type, so much the type that it seemed hardly credible he should n't turn out the exception to prove the rule. He had already, one would think, made a sufficient divergence.

And that, I suppose—the feeling that no personality *could* follow so undeviating a line, so obviously its own path—was responsible for my impression, when I came later to hear how completely he *had* followed it, of his being because of it much more unique than he could ever

have made himself by turning aside. True enough, there are people who, if they heard the tale, might maintain that he could hardly have accomplished a more striking divergence from type. I'll have to confess I thought so myself—at the first; certainly I thought so all the while I listened, long afterward, to the quiet, though somewhat nasal, and thoroughly puzzled voice of the gentle old man from Dubuque, who seemed, as he recounted the story, to be seeking in me some solution of Corey's phenomenon.

I thought it even afterward, until, sitting there where he had left me, I began slowly to orient the facts in relation to Corey's character. And then, all at once, it came to me that it was exactly because Corey *had n't* diverged that he did what he did. He went straight through everything to his predestined end. Any other man would have had stages, subtleties, degrees of divergence. But Corey knew none of those things.

It was from old Mr. Ewing of Dubuque that I had my first news of Corey after that night in the Paris hotel.

He must have gone back to his army in the Balkans the next day, for we were to have seen him that night again in case he had to stay over, and when I asked I was told that Monsieur had gone.

Things kept reminding me of him. The names of streets and places in Paris recalled his flat American mispronunciation of them—mispronunciations which sounded half as if he were in fun and half as if he did n't know any better, or had n't paid enough attention to learn them correctly. I believe he saw, or was subconsciously aware of, his own incongruity. Still, one would think he'd have become, so to speak, accustomed to himself in the strange rôle by then.

I think I must have spoken of him rather often to people, so long as I remained in Paris; and it was, if not exactly curious, at least a little less than one would expect, that I never came in contact with any one else who knew him, until that day, a little while ago, when I met, in the smoking-car of a west-bound train out of Chicago, the man who told me all there was, or ever will be, for any man to tell about Corey.

He may have been sitting there near me all the time;

I don't know. But then he was not the kind of man one notices in a smoking-car, or any other place, for that matter. Certainly you would never suspect that so gray and uninteresting an envelope could inclose the manuscript of a story like Corey's. You had seen hundreds like him before, and you knew what they contained — stereotyped circular letters full of dull, indisputable facts, nothing you wanted or cared to know. And it was precisely because I wished later on one of those very dull facts that I came to speak to my man.

The train coming to a sudden stop brought me out of my oblivion, and, looking idly out of the window to see what place it might be, I was seized by one of those fits of petty annoyance incident to such interruptions, for the train had run so far past the platform that I found it impossible to see the name of the station. I got myself out of my comfortable position, and tried, by turning completely about, to see back to the station. But we had gone too far. And then — I haven't an idea why, for it was of absolutely no importance to me — I looked about for some one to ask. And nearest me, sitting rather uncomfortably upright in his big leather chair, the little rack at his elbow guiltless of any glass, and holding listlessly in his hand the latest popular magazine, sat a gray-haired, gray-suited old gentleman, looking lonesomely out of his window.

"I beg pardon," I said. "Can you tell me what place this is?"

He turned gratefully at the sound of my voice. "It's —," he told me. I've never been able to recall what name he said, because, I suppose, of what came after.

It was certainly not surprising that he should think, from my manner, that I had some interest in the place, and he went on, after a moment's hesitating silence, to say, in his unobtrusive but unmistakable Middle-West voice, that the town was a milling center — flour and meal, and that kind of thing.

I saw that I had committed myself to something more in the way of conversation than my laconic word of thanks for his information and a lapse into silence. I wondered what I could say. He was such a nice, kindly

old gentleman, and he would never in the world have addressed any one first. I hit upon the most obvious sequence, and asked if, then, he was familiar with that part of the country. He said, oh yes, he was "a native of Iowa."

"Indeed?" I said, for lack of anything else to say, and his statement not having been a particularly provocative one.

"Yes," he said. "My home is Dubuque."

Dubuque! Dubuque! What was it I knew about Dubuque? The name struck me instantly with a sense of importance, as if it had rung the bell of a target concealed out of sight. I sought about in my mind for a full minute before I recalled, with a kind of start—Corey.

So many things had come in between—bigger things than any one man—and overlaid all the pictures that had gone before. Overlaid them with pigment so crude, so roughly applied, that one neither saw nor remembered anything else. All the nations of Europe loosed in the Great War, and America straining hard at her worn leash of neutrality. Small wonder that Corey, of Dubuque, along with countless other memories of that pale time, had faded into a dim, far perspective.

And yet, the sound of that name had brought him—as clearly as I had seen him that night in Paris—before me. I heard his voice, felt the vigor of his personality, saw him throw back his head and laugh. And here, in the chair next my own, and ready to talk, sat a man who, by every rule of probability and chance, would be able to tell me about him.

"I know a townsman of yours," I said, and he evinced at once a kind of mild and flattered surprise.

"From Dubuque?" he said. "Well, well! What's his name?"

"Corey," I said. "Doctor Corey."

It had upon him a most unexpected effect; very much, it seemed, the same effect his announcement had had upon me the moment before. He leaned forward no more than an inch, but his mild gray eyes kindled with a kind of excited intensity.

"You knew Jim Corey! Not here—not in Dubuque?"

"I met him in Paris," I said, "quite a long while ago."

"In *Paris*! Well, well—think of that!"

He shook his head, and regarded me suddenly with a stronger and new kind of interest. I was, apparently, the first person he had ever encountered who had really known Corey abroad, and I could see that the fact had established me immediately in his mind as an intimate friend of Corey's. I suppose I should have told him that I had only seen Corey once; that I could n't, as a matter of fact, claim more than a passing acquaintance. But if I had, I should never have heard what I heard. And, anyway, it would n't have been, in the sense in which such things count, exactly true—for it had never been, for me at least, a one night's acquaintance. I had seemed to know Corey better in that one night than one knows most men in a month of companionship. Yes, it was something more than the curiosity of a passing acquaintance that caused me to let the old fellow keep his impression.

"It's queer," he said, suddenly, throwing up his head, and pressing open the pages of his popular magazine as if he were about to begin to read, "he was a kind of relative of mine. His father and I—third cousins on our mothers' side." He broke off and regarded me again silently, and I believe now that he was trying to persuade himself not to go on, not to say anything more. But the temptation, the maximum, I might say, of temptation, combined with the minimum of danger that he should ever see me again, overcame his natural shyness and discretion. He seemed to decide, upon my ejaculation, to go on.

"His house is just 'round the corner from mine. His wife lives there now."

"His wife!" The surprise was plain enough in my voice. And this seemed, just for a second, to surprise him, too.

"You knew," he said, "that he had married?"

I explained that I had n't seen Corey for several years, and added that I had, however, understood that he was thinking of settling down. It put, I could see, a different

face upon what he had to tell, for he seemed to adjust himself, as if he must now go back to something he had thought already understood between us.

"You didn't know, then," he said, "that he was dead?"

Dead! Corey dead! So that was what he had to tell. There sprang up in my mind a vague, indefinite vision of something heroic in connection with the Great War. When, I asked, and where did he die?

"A little over three months ago, in Europe. I was his executor."

There was something in the way he made his last statement which lent it a kind of special importance. And it proved, indeed, in the end, the fact of supreme importance. And here, as if it were due me, he told me his name—Ewing; and I told him mine.

"Yes," he said, "I made a trip to New York to see a man who'd been with him before he died. He brought a message from Corey. Queer," he said, "that message. He must have been—a little off, you know, at the last."

It was clear that something had occurred on his trip to New York which had puzzled him then, and continued, in spite of his explanation, to puzzle him still. It was evident in the way he went back, presently, to the beginning, as if he were stating a problem or building up a case.

He began by saying that he supposed nobody in Dubuque ever had understood Corey—"and yet"—he faced me—"you wouldn't say he was hard to understand?"

I said that he had seemed to me to have an extremely straightforward and simple personality; that that, to me, had been one of his charms.

"Exactly!" he said, "exactly! That's what we always thought in Dubuque—and I've known Jim Corey since the day he was born. Why, he'd go away on one of his trips, and stay a year, sometimes two, and the day after he'd get back you'd think he'd never been out of Dubuque, except he was so glad to be home."

And, talking with a growing and homely fluency, the nasal quality of his rather pleasant voice increasing ac-

cording to the sharpness of his interest, he proceeded to sketch in, with the fine brush of his provincialism, all the details of that picture I had had so clearly of Corey that night in Paris, more than four years before.

It was astonishing how right my picture had been; how they, who had known him always, had been no better able than I to visualize Corey outside Dubuque.

And it seemed to have been the merest chance which had led him, the year of his graduation from medical school, to take his first trip away from his native State. He had "put himself" through college, and had come out with all the school had to give, wanting more. It was doubtful if Corey had ever read a novel through in his life, but the college library yielded up treasures in scientific and medical books whose plots he remembered as easily as boarding-school girls remember the plots of Laura Jean Libbey.

In the end he had happened to be engrossed in some experiments or other with herbs, and it was that which led him to decide upon going to China. He was going to study Chinese herbs. And he had gone, straight, without any stops *en route*, as he did everything. But when he had been in Peking two weeks the Boxer Rebellion broke out, and there he was in the thick of it; and a god-send he was, too, in the foreign legations, fighting and caring for wounded by turns, day and night, youth and strength and his fresh fine skill counting for ten in that beleaguered handful of desperate men.

It was for that he had got his first decoration — Japan's Order of the Rising Sun, and a little later had come from France, for the same service, and quite to the surprise of Corey, the scarlet ribbon of the Legion of Honor.

There had been, of course, the appropriate furore — pictures and full-page interviews in the San Francisco papers on his way home, and Dubuque expecting to see him come back transformed, a hero, conscious of honors won. But he had arrived, to their amazement, merely himself, and they had accepted him, after a day or two, at his own valuation.

That was the first, and it seemed after that, although

he was always off to one of the far corners of the earth, they were never able to look upon him when he came home as a distinguished traveler returned. He was simply, as he seemed to wish to be, "Jim," or sometimes "Doc" Corey come home again. And yet they knew about the things he had done. They knew where he had been. And they knew, too, about his decorations. They had seen them on one or two occasions, when he had been the guest of the evening at the "Business Men's Banquet," and he had "dressed up," the old gentleman said, in a full-dress suit and all his decorations. "Two rows, all kinds, by then." One could imagine him doing that, in a spirit of comic masquerade. And one could imagine him also doing it merely to please them.

His wife, after he was married, used to get out his decorations and show them to her women friends, and at this Corey only laughed good-humoredly. But she never showed them to men; she seemed to sense how that would embarrass him.

I asked when he had married her, and who she was.

She had been visiting friends, he said, in Dubuque, when Corey came back, he believed, from the Balkan War, in the spring of 1913. Pretty quick work they made of it, too. In August that same summer they had the wedding at her house in Des Moines. But it had surprised nobody. They knew he'd been wanting to settle down; and she was just the right kind of girl—nice and wholesome, and fond of her home. At last, he said, he was going to begin to live.

He had dropped at once into his place, exactly as if he had never been away at all—as if, after his graduation, he had come home to practise his profession. There was nothing even about his house to indicate the traveler; no obtrusive trophies of strange lands; no bizarre knick-knacks. In a room in the attic were a half-full dunnage-bag, a traveler's kit, and an officer's trunk, small size, the lid pressed down but warped a little so that it would not lock. And in the corner three pairs of heavy, discarded boots, gathering dust. That was all.

And he *was* happy; naturally, sanely, unaffectedly happy. There was no room for doubt about that. "Hon-

esty," Mr. Ewing called it. He used that word over and over again in relation to Corey's psychology at that time. "And there was n't," he said, "a hypocritical bone in Jim Corey's body." One could see what he meant, and see, too, that it had, in his mind, some obscure bearing on what came after.

He waited a little here before he went on, as if he were going over to himself incidents too trivial to relate, but which would not separate themselves from his memory of Corey in those days.

"Well," he began, abruptly, rousing himself from his secret contemplation, "there was that winter, nineteen-thirteen, and the next summer, nineteen-fourteen; and then the European war began."

"And he went!" I supplemented, involuntarily, since from the trend of the narrative I had, of course, seen that coming.

"No," said Mr. Ewing in a surprisingly quiet tone of contradiction. "No, he didn't. I was like you. I thought he'd go."

"You thought he *would*!" I exclaimed, for it seemed to me he had just been trying to make me see how unshakably he had believed Corey to be fixed in Dubuque.

"Certainly," he said. "You'd think it would be only natural he'd want to go. Would n't *you*?" he asked, as if he had detected in my expression some disposition not to agree.

"I would," I said, still wondering at the ease with which he had brushed aside what I had foreseen was to be his climax. For my imagination had long since outrun his story to the end of the usual domestic tragedy, wherein Corey had, at the first call of adventure, forsaken without a word his home and his wife, to find (had not Mr. Ewing told me in the very beginning of his death, three months before, some place in Europe?) his abrupt and unexpected dénouement.

There had been, then, something else. "But he did," I put forth, "finally go? You said, I think, that he died over there?"

"Oh yes—finally. But that, you see, was n't what counted. It was n't the same. It was the way he went."

"The *way*?" I repeated.

"Yes. He did n't go the way, I mean, that I thought he'd go. The way *you* thought, too."

I said I did n't understand; that I could n't see what difference it made *how* he went, so long as he did go in the end.

"It made *all* the difference," said Mr. Ewing. "You see, he did n't rush off, at the first news of the fighting, the way you'd think a man would. Why, we used to read the papers and talk over the war news together, and every day I'd expect to hear him say something about going. He knew all the places, and the way everything was over there, but he never seemed to care to be there himself. He used to come round to my house just before supper-time in the evenings and we'd sit on the porch and talk, or maybe I'd go round to his porch. I asked him one day if he did n't want to go, and all he said was, 'Why should I?' And I said I did n't know, it seemed to me that he would. And he said he was comfortable for the first time in his life; he never had liked bumping around in all sorts of places; hated it as a matter of fact. I asked him why, if that was the case, he'd kept it up for so long, all those years; and he laughed, and said *he* did n't know; he never *had* been able to figure that out."

Mr. Ewing fell silent here, tapping his right foot on the carpet a little impatiently and looking speculatively, yet without seeing, at me. I had the impression that he felt he had utterly failed, up to now, in making some subtle point in his story clear, and was considering how best he might make me see. I was sure of it when, after a longish pause, he continued, for he seemed to have decided upon the abandonment of subtleties altogether, and to give me, for my own interpretation, the facts as they occurred.

Things had gone on without any change all that winter and the next summer. In August Corey went to some sort of convention of medical men in Philadelphia. He was to have been gone something over two weeks. At the end of that time Mrs. Corey had received a letter saying that some experiments in which he was specially interested had developed rather unexpectedly, and Corey,

together with several others, had been detailed to stay on and work them out to their conclusion. He could n't say just how many days it would take; he would let her know.

At the end of another two weeks Corey was still away. The first phase of the experiments had unhappily come to grief, and they had had to begin from the first again. It was annoying, but since they had gone into it, there was nothing else to be done. He would leave for home on the moment of the work's completion. Meantime there would be little opportunity for letter-writing. She was not to worry.

As the days went on Mrs. Corey began to regret not having gone along in the beginning, as he had wanted her to do. Mr. Ewing stopped in now and then to inquire. Her reticence made him wonder if she might not be hearing. It was plain that she *did* worry, but, as Mr. Ewing said, she was not the talkative kind.

And then, one morning, just two months from the day he had left, Corey arrived unexpectedly by the ten-fifty train. Mr. Ewing, passing the house on his way home that evening, had been surprised to see Corey, in his shirt-sleeves, trimming shrubs in the garden. And he had stopped to welcome him back, and they had talked about the war in quite the old way, so that from that evening on it was exactly the same as it had been before Corey had gone to his convention in Philadelphia.

It appears that all this time a very natural intimacy was growing up between these two, gentle old Mr. Ewing and Corey. And I can imagine that Corey, who became, as it were, the instantaneous friend of every one, had made in his life very few actual contacts, few, if any, real and intimate friendships. And perhaps that was why this friendship, based as it was on such small outward manifestations as talking over the news in the daily papers together, had prospered. Then, too, there was the relationship, distant enough to be free of demands.

Corey had returned from the Philadelphia trip the last week in October. It was on a Sunday afternoon near the middle of December that Mr. Ewing, sitting reading his weekly illustrated paper, looked up to see through the window Corey coming quickly along the walk. Mr.

Ewing was struck by something peculiar in his friend's appearance, something hurried in the set of his hat and overcoat, yet as if he himself were entirely unconscious of haste.

He turned in at the gate, and Mr. Ewing got up and opened the door. Corey came through it, Mr. Ewing said, as if escaping from something outside, something of which he was physically afraid. He almost pushed past Mr. Ewing and into the room, and with scarcely a glance to make sure they were alone, he spoke, and his voice was strained like a note on a too taut violin string:

"She's found it! *This* — where I'd had it hid!"

He held extended in his open hand, as if there were no longer any reason for concealing it from any one, what appeared to Mr. Ewing's bewildered eyes to be a bit of ribbon, striped green and red, and a bit of bronze metal attached.

"What is it?" he asked, stupefied by the completeness of the change that had come upon the man before him.

"It's the *Croix!*" Corey's voice was impatient, "The *Croix de Guerre!*"

Mr. Ewing stared at the bright-colored thing, trying to comprehend. Corey still held it outstretched in his hand, and the bronze Maltese cross with its crossed swords slipped through his fingers and hung down. Corey's voice was going on. Mr. Ewing had missed something.

". . . So now she knows," was the end of what he heard — and in that instant his eye caught the words engraved on the cross, *République Française*, and the full meaning of its being there in Corey's hand burst suddenly upon him.

The new French decoration! The *Croix de Guerre!*

"You've *been* there?" he managed to say. "You've been over there?"

"How else would I get it?" said Corey, with a kind of abandon, as if he were confessing now to some fullness of shame. "You see, she's right. I could n't resist."

Mr. Ewing was lost. "Resist what?"

"This!" Corey closed his fingers now on the *Croix*. "A new decoration!"

And then, as if every atom of his great, strong body

had suddenly succumbed to some long-growing exhaustion, Corey dropped down into a chair and threw out his arm across the table as if he would put away from him as far as possible that offending decoration.

"But when?" — Mr. Ewing found himself reiterating — "when — when — you haven't been away —"

"Oh, yes," said Corey. "You remember, in August."

And here Mr. Ewing confessed that he thought for a moment that Corey must be hopelessly mad. There was the question of time, and a dozen other questions besides. It seemed out of the realm of possibility, out of the realm of reason.

"How did you keep her from knowing?"

Mr. Ewing had not wanted to ask — had hoped the point would explain itself — and Corey looked for a moment as if he might be planning an evasion — then braced himself and looked Mr. Ewing straight in the eyes. A faint expression of scorn came round his mouth, as if he spoke of another — a scoundrel who hardly deserved his scorn.

"I left letters — dated ahead — with the scrubwoman at the laboratory to mail." He said it, took his eyes from Mr. Ewing's, and then he appeared to wait.

Mr. Ewing sat there filled with a kind of amazement, touched with fear for what should come next, and suddenly he became conscious that Corey was watching him with what seemed a tremendous anxiety, waiting for him to speak. And a moment later, apparently no longer able to bear that silence, Corey leaned nervously toward Mr. Ewing, and asked in the tone of one seeking an answer of utmost importance: "You don't see it? You don't see what she saw?"

"See what?" said Mr. Ewing — "what *who* saw?" Yet he knew that Corey had meant his wife. It was she who had found the *Croix* . . . but what did he mean she had seen?

"Don't keep it back — just to be decent! She said it was plain, plain enough for anybody to see. What I want to *know* is if everybody knew it but me!"

"Knew what?" cried poor Mr. Ewing, lost more completely now than before.

"Knew why I've done all the things I've done — run all the risks. Why I went over there this time, in August, without letting her know — God knows *I* didn't know why! — why I've *always* gone!"

"Why have you?" The question asked itself.

"Because I wanted the decorations! The damned orders and medals and things! Because I could n't resist getting a new one — wherever I saw a chance. Do you believe a man could be as — as *rotten* as that, all his life, and not know it himself?"

Slowly, then, Mr. Ewing began to see. And remotely it began to dawn upon him — the thing "she" in her anger had done. For there was no doubt that the thing was done. The man's faith and belief in himself, in the cleanness and simplicity of his own motives, were gone — and gone in a single devastating blow from which he had not, and could never, recover. And, searching for the right thing to say, Mr. Ewing stumbled, as one always will, upon the one thing he should never have said:

"But you know better than that. You know it's not so."

Corey's answer was not argumentative; it only stated, wearily, the fact which from the first had seemed to possess his mind:

"No, I don't know it's not so. I've never been able to give any reasons for doing the things myself. *You've* asked me why. . . . I could n't tell."

"Why, it was youth," said Mr. Ewing, and one can imagine him saying it, gently, as an old-fashioned physician might offer his homely remedy to a patient whose knowledge exceeded his own. "Men do those things when they're young."

And Corey, rejecting the simple, old-fashioned cure, made an attempt at a smile for the kindness in which it was offered. "All men are young, some time," he said; "all men don't do them."

"But you happened to be the kind who would." And at this Corey made no attempt to smile.

"That's it!" he said. "*I was n't* the kind. I was the kind to stay at home. . . . *I* know that. I was always

happier here in Dubuque. And now—this last—You'd hardly say that was on account of my youth!"

"No—but it had got into your blood."

Corey at this gave a start and looked up suddenly at Mr. Ewing. "Into my blood— It's the very word she used! When she admitted I might not have known it myself, she said she supposed it was just 'in my blood'!"

He made a gesture which began violently and ended in futility, and sat silent, looking off steadily into space, as if hearing again all those dreadful revelations of hers. And once or twice Mr. Ewing, who sat helplessly by, waiting, perhaps praying, for some inspiration, made a valiant but utterly vain effort to put out his hand, to show by some mere physical act, if no other, his unshaken belief in his friend.

And so, when the need for speech had become imperative, Mr. Ewing found himself saying something to the effect that these things pass; that she had only been angry, and had said the first thing that had come into her mind. And Corey, realizing the extremity into which he had led his friend, rose and, either ignoring or not hearing, from the depth of the chasm into which he had fallen, Mr. Ewing's last remark, made some hurried attempt at apology, and awkwardly moved toward the door.

Mr. Ewing had only been able to follow after, and say, lamely, and in spite of himself, that he mustn't say or do anything he might be sorry for, and that they would see each other again. And then he stood in the open door and watched Corey go down the path to the gate, and along the walk, until he had turned the corner, and so out of sight.

And then he had gone back into the house and spent the remainder of that afternoon trying to realize what had passed, trying to decide upon what he should say the next time they met.

But he had reached no conclusion, and in the end had decided to leave it to chance. And Chance had solved his problem with her usual original simplicity. She took away the need for his saying anything at all; for the following day the station cab drove up to Corey's front

gate and stopped. The driver got down from his seat and went up the walk and into the house. A moment later he came out again, bearing on his shoulder the small-size officer's trunk, the lid forced down now and locked, and in one hand, dragging slightly, a full dunnage-bag. And after him followed Corey. And no one followed him. No one came out on the porch to say good-by. No one stood at the window. The driver put the trunk on the seat beside him, and the dunnage-bag into the seat beside Corey. And then, without a word or a sign, they drove away toward the station.

It was understood in Dubuque after the next few days that Corey had gone to help in the war; he had received an urgent message from France.

And Mr. Ewing received, the day after Corey's departure, a little note of farewell, written in pencil, while he was waiting for his train, and mailed at the station. It said merely good-by, and that he hoped he would understand.

The next week Mrs. Corey closed up the house and went to Des Moines, to stay with her people, she said, until her husband's return.

And that was all Mr. Ewing had ever known of what passed between those two, of the details that led to the sudden and final decision to go. And it was all that he had heard of Corey until that day, three months ago, when there came to him the unexpected letter from the man in New York, telling of Corey's death, and of a message and papers he had to deliver. Mr. Ewing had replied at once that he would go, and had followed his letter almost immediately. He had seemed to feel, ever since that Sunday afternoon, when he had failed to be of use, an increasing sense of responsibility.

He had met the man at his club; and I had, as he told of the meeting, as he described the man, a curious impression of actually seeing them there, in the big Fifth Avenue club, sitting in deeply luxurious chairs and no table between—the gentle, gray-haired, gray-eyed, gray-garbed Mr. Ewing, who had never been in New York City before; and the other, tall, very tall, with black hair, black eyes, and brown burned skin, who looked, Mr.

Ewing said, as if he'd done all the things Corey had done.

It had been quite by chance that this man, whose name was Burke, and Corey had been attached to the same section and were thrown in that way a good deal together. And his very first statement had shown, with all the force of the casual phrase, how tremendously Corey had changed.

"A queer fellow," he said, "no one could understand." And he was a man, one would say, well accustomed to the queerest of men.

Mr. Ewing said yes, he supposed one would call him that, and asked just in what way Burke had thought Corey queer.

And Burke, it seemed, had had more than enough to base the idea upon. He cast about in his mind to select one out of the many queer things. And he had hit upon the most revealing one of them all.

Corey, he said, had gone about covered with medals, two rows, overlapping, on duty and off, all the time. That in itself was queer, especially for an American. Most men wore bars, but Corey had worn the whole thing. And yet, Burke said, he was the least egotistical man he had ever known. And he had seen him wince when other men, passing, had smiled at sight of his decorations. He could never make it out.

There was no wonder in that. Mr. Ewing, who knew Corey well, and had, one might say, something to go on, could n't make it out. And no more, for that matter, could I. There was something in it a little bizarre, and certainly alien. Surely no normal Anglo-Saxon American had ever indulged in such extremes of self-flagellation as that!

And then, abruptly and unbidden, there came into my mind a story of the old West, the story of how in the pioneer days a gambler, sitting down to play solitaire, laid his gun on the table beside him and, if he caught himself cheating, administered justice first hand by shooting himself. To be sure, in those days a man was pretty certain of playing a straight game. Well, so had Corey been, too, sure of the straightness of *his* game. And I

have heard it vouched for that, even in those robust times, the thing had been seen to happen, and to come, with just that appalling simplicity of psychology, from cause to effect, straight, and without hesitation.

The analogy grew, for Burke averred that the queerest thing of all about Corey was that he had been the only man he had ever seen lacking entirely the emotion of fear. He volunteered on every sort of hazardous enterprise, and came through safe when men beside him were killed, time after time, protected, they had got to believe, by the inscrutable quality of his fearlessness. It was, Burke said, as if against some other secret consideration death to Corey counted nothing at all.

Then there was something a little peculiar in so silent a man having so many friends. Corey silent! Remembering him, one could hardly credit that change. Burke qualified that by saying that when he used the word silent, he did n't in any sense mean morose. Corey had never been that. He merely had n't, as people somehow seemed to expect him to do, talked. And what he had meant by "friends" he wished to qualify, too. He had n't meant pals. There had been nothing so active as that. But there were ways to tell when a man was well liked. For example, no one who knew him had ever seen anything funny about Corey's decorations, and they never talked about it among themselves.

Somebody had once asked Corey how long he had been over the first time. It was evident that he *had* been there before, because of the *Croix de Guerre* he wore when he came. And Corey had answered, about six weeks, or a little less.

"And you got the *Croix* in that time?" An exclamation forced out of the fellow's astonishment, and bringing from Corey an answer without a hint of rebuff, yet certainly nothing that a man could call brag.

"You forget," he said, with an almost imperceptible glance down at his two rows of medals—"I knew the ropes."

The man had afterward said to Burke that he was sorry he'd asked. But he did n't see anything to be ashamed of in the *Croix*—and Corey wore it where a

fellow could n't help seeing. There was, Burke said, a queer kind of apology in it. No, there had been nothing like brag in Corey's answer. There had been none of that in anything he had done. And he had been, according to Burke, the best surgeon of them all, the best man at his work. But of course he had come to disaster in the end. A man can't go on ignoring danger like that.

They were stationed at Jubécourt, outside Verdun, and for months the struggle had raged, attack and counter-attack, for the possession of Hill 304. Corey had gone up to the front *poste de secours* at Esnes, where in an underground shelter fitted up in what had been the basement of an ancient château, reduced now to ruins by the German shells, he was giving first aid to the wounded brought in from the trenches.

Word had come into the *poste* one night that an officer, lying in a trench dugout, was too far gone to move. And Corey had volunteered to go, alone, on foot, along the zigzag communication trench that led to the dugout, under the incessant shelling, and see what he could do. And early that morning, about three o'clock, they had been carried in, Corey and his officer—the only two who had come out of that trench alive.

From the officer they had the story of what Corey had done; not many words, to be sure, and little embellishment, but such accounts need no flowers, no figures of speech. The facts are enough, told in gasps, as this one was, hurriedly, while yet there was strength, as one pays a debt, all at once, for fear he may never again have gold to pay.

A trench torpedo had found its mark. And Corey, bending above him, had deliberately braced himself, holding his arms out, and had received in his stead the exploding pieces of shell. He raised himself on his elbow to look at Corey, unconscious, on the next stretcher. He wanted it understood. He sent for an orderly and dictated a message which he managed to sign, and despatched it post-haste to Staff Headquarters. And then he resigned himself to the hands of those about him.

The news had come in to Jubécourt by telephone, and just before dawn Burke had gone up to see what could

be done. When he reached the *poste* Corey had regained consciousness, and was waiting for him. He had sent word ahead that he was coming. And Corey was wounded, Burke said, in a way no other man could have withstood. And the "queer" thing now was that he knew it, and when Burke leaned over him there was a gleam in his eyes as if he were keeping it there by his own will power.

He seemed relieved then, and began at once—he had saved a surprising amount of strength—to speak. He knew Burke planned to go to New York, and he wanted him to deliver some papers. They were in his bag, at Jubécourt; he told him where he should find the key, and then he asked Burke to write down Mr. Ewing's name and address.

It was while Burke was crossing the dim, lamp-lighted room in search of a pencil or pen that some one had stopped him to say that the General was coming at eleven to confer upon Corey the *Medaille Militaire*. It had given Burke a distinct kind of shock. Could it be, he wondered, that *that* was what Corey had saved himself for? For Corey knew, as well as they, that the *Medaille Militaire* was the one decoration never conferred upon dead men. He had gone on and borrowed the pen, and on the way back had asked if he might be allowed to tell Corey. It might, he said, do him some good. That news had turned the balance for more than one man.

But when, a few moments later, Burke, receiving permission, had told Corey his news, he had been for a moment afraid that the balance *had* turned—and in the wrong way. Corey had seemed hardly to comprehend, and then a sudden unaccountable change had come over his face.

"The *Medaille!*" he gasped. "What time did you say?"

"Eleven," Burke told him—"three hours from now."

He seemed then to be considering something deep within himself, so that Burke hardly heard when he said, "That's time enough." And Burke, thinking that he had been measuring his strength against the time, hastened a little awkwardly to reassure him. But Corey,

ignoring his assurance, had seemed to arrive at some secret conclusion.

"Did you put down the name?" he asked.

Burke had forgotten the name, and Corey told him again, patiently, spelling out the address. He watched while Burke wrote.

"The papers all go to him." He was silent a moment. Then: "Listen," he said. "Will you give him this message for me?"

Burke promised, whatever he wished, word for word.

"Tell him," he said, "that it breaks a man's luck to know what he wants."

"Yes," said Burke. "Is there anything else?"

The strength had drained out of Corey's voice with the last words. Again he waited while he seemed to decide. And when he spoke, at last, a strange gentleness had come into his tone, so that Burke was not surprised to hear that the message was meant now for a woman.

"Tell him," said Corey, "there's no use letting *her* know about the *Medaille Militaire*."

And although Burke had divined some obscure meaning in Corey's words, he was yet not quite certain that he had heard aright. "You mean that she's *not* to know?"

Corey nodded his head, yes, and Burke saw that he was no longer able to speak. Turning, he motioned an orderly to his side, and whispered that he was afraid Corey would never last until eleven.

The orderly sped away, and a moment later the French doctor in charge stood beside Corey's stretcher, opening his hypodermic case.

And then, Burke said, he had done what seemed to him the "queerest" thing of all. He had made a signal for Burke to come nearer, and when he had leaned down, he said, "Remember to tell him I did n't take *that*." He was looking at the hypodermic the doctor held in his hand.

"But the *Medaille* —" began Burke, and was stopped by the strangeness of Corey's expression. He had, he said, smiled a secret mysterious smile, and closed his eyes with a curious look of contentment.

And even the French doctor had seen, by something in his faint gesture of refusal, that Corey would never

submit to his restorative. He put the case down on a box, with a nod to the orderly, in case Corey should change his mind.

And Burke had stayed by until the Division General, just half an hour too late, had arrived at exactly eleven o'clock. Corey had not changed his mind. . . .

That, then, was the end of the story.

So much affected was I at the nature of poor Corey's death that I almost forgot Mr. Ewing, sitting there across from me in our comfortable smoking-car, and that he might, in all decency, expect some comment from me. Indeed, I think I should have forgotten altogether if I had not felt after a little a relaxation of his long-continued gaze, and I knew he was going to speak.

"Why," he said, "do *you* think he did n't want her to know?"

So that was the thing which had puzzled him in New York, the thing which still puzzled him now.

Well, it had puzzled me, too; and I could give him no answer, except to confess that I did n't know. But long after the train had passed through Dubuque, and Mr. Ewing and I had said good-by, an answer, perhaps right, perhaps wrong, presented itself to my mind.

If one followed Corey at all, one must follow him all the way; perhaps he had wished to save her the pang of an added disgrace.